

VZCZCXRO6749

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DE RUEHTH #1335 2631122
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 191122Z SEP 08
FM AMEMBASSY ATHENS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2519
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS ATHENS 001335

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ELAB](#) [EAIR](#) [KCRM](#) [GR](#)

SUBJECT: OLYMPIC AIRLINES EMPLOYEES DISRUPT ATHENS AIRPORT
OPERATIONS

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED Q PROTECT ACCORDINGLY

¶1. (SBU) Athens International Airport flight operations were briefly disrupted September 18 when members of Olympic Airlines' machinists and ground support union staged a sit-in on the tarmac of one of the airport's two main runways. The unionists were protesting EU approval of a decision by the Karamanlis government to liquidate and re-launch Olympic Airlines, Greece's national air carrier. Adding to the chaos, demonstrators used smoke flares which ignited a brush fire near the runway; airport firefighters responded immediately and doused the flames. After ten to fifteen minutes of chantig ad shouting insults at the government and Olympic's management, the protesters removed themselves from the runway and allowed the resumption of take-offs and landings. There have been no arrests; we anticipate that none will be forthcoming.

¶2. (SBU) Union representatives have declared an "unrelenting struggle" against the government and announced more "targeted fighting action" to follow in the coming days. They have announced that they will "seize" Olympic's main office in Athens on September 19, and continue demonstrations outside key government ministries and in downtown Athens.

¶3. (SBU) Comment: We suspect that there are few EU countries that would stomach a protest by workers that shut down a runway of the nation's busiest airport. And, we suspect that there are even fewer EU countries that would accept no law enforcement response to such activity. However, this incident is a further indication of the Greek tolerance for protests and demonstrations that go far beyond free expression and result in damage to property or business. Although the Olympic workers' protest made news in Greece, there has been little popular discussion about whether the nations' best interests are served by such behavior. Rather, the popular discussion has tended to center on the effects of Olympic's restructuring on its employees. For its part, the Karamanlis government remains firm in its resolve to restructure the debt-ridden enterprise, despite its declining polling numbers. It remains to be seen whether the Karamanlis government's resolve to stick to its reform guns can weather the public outcry as it did over the pension reforms during the spring. End Comment.

SPECKHARD